

THE DIFFERENTIAL BIRTH RATE

New Light on Causes from American Figures

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AMONG the quantity of valuable data which is gathered together in Huntington and Whitney's *Builders of America*, there are one or two tables of very particular interest to those of us in this country who are concerned, not only with the fact of the differential birth rate, but with the nature of its causes.

The present writer has more than once put forward in the *EUGENICS REVIEW* the opinion that the principal cause of the differential birth rate lies in the inheritance of qualities, temperamental as well as physical, which influence fertility; or to be more precise, which influence the actual number of children born. On this view the social selections which sort out the population into the different social strata, favour the social rise, not only of energy, competence, and in general the qualities which we admire and value in the practical working of our social institutions, but also of those qualities, whether physical or temperamental, which lead to small families, and consequently, as the Malthusians insist, to a "Good start in life."

The links of this argument are all demonstrably sound. It is not only known that physical and temperamental peculiarities are heritable, but it has been shown that persons coming from smaller families, do, in equivalent environments, e.g., as peeresses, have on the average fewer children than persons from larger families. The importance of the burden of large families is fairly obvious, but it, too, has been the subject of detailed economic demonstration. The reality of the selection which favours the social rise of all hereditary tendencies favouring paucity of children must be admitted; yet as the argument is somewhat subtle and indirect, it may be doubted, and usually is doubted at a first glance, whether

we have here a major and controlling cause of the differential birth rate, or a very minor and subsidiary one. It is usual, for example, to ascribe the observed differences in fertility to differences in social environment, or to some assumed physiological connection between infertility and the powers of the mind. Causes which have been suggested are: Excess of food, which the upper social classes are presumably believed to consume; excess of leisure; the stress of brain work; the enervating influence of comfort.

THE TWO VIEWS TESTED

However baseless these supposed causes may appear to be when each is examined in detail, it is certainly possible that there might be some subtle influence of the social environment really unfavourable to normal family life. The sharpest possible test between the two views would be to ascertain the relative fertilities among men of a given social class of those who had risen rapidly in the social scale as opposed to those who were born in that class. For on the theory that we have to do principally with heritable factors affecting fertility, the fertility of the upper social classes must be *kept low* by the lower fertility of those whom social promotion brings into their ranks, the movement downwards of the more fertile members of the upper classes being relatively a very feeble one; while the fertility of the upper class would be expected to recover, if it were left to itself, by the replacement of its less fertile by its more fertile strains. Consequently the groups enjoying rapid social promotion should, on this theory, be even less fertile than the classes to which they rise.

If, on the contrary, the important causes were any of those to be included under

"social environment," we should certainly expect the families which rise in the social scale to carry with them some measure of the fertility of the classes from which they originated. Now, Huntington and Whitney give a remarkable table of the average number of children per person in the American *Who's Who*, when the persons are subdivided according to the education they received. They are given in descending order.

Kind of Education	Estimated Children per person
-College and Professional	2.4
College and Ph.D.	2.3
College	2.3
Normal, business, trade, secretarial	2.3
High School	2.1
Elementary Schools and Home ...	2.1
Professional School Only	1.9

As the total number of persons dealt with is about 25,000, the trend of these averages cannot possibly be ascribed to chance. The table appears to show unmistakably that among Americans who attain a sufficient level of eminence to be included in *Who's Who*, those whose social promotion has been most striking have on the average fewer children than those whose social promotion has been less. Such a result would appear inexplicable on any of the views that connect the differential fertility of different classes with elements in their social environment, and is a striking confirmation of one of the most surprising consequences of the theory that the dominating cause lies in the social promotion of the relatively infertile.

SOCIAL PROMOTION AT WORK

Whitney and Huntington give also the results of another inquiry, which bear upon the same problem. They have studied the average abilities shown by Yale students coming from families of 1, 2, 3, and up to 6 or more. They find, in general, that the average ability rises as we pass from

families of 1 to families of 2, and so on up to the largest families. This, of course, is not at all what we should find, either in England or America, if we were to test the sons of the population at large. In the population at large the classes which furnish the largest families would certainly show the lowest average scores, whether we took a scholastic, an athletic, or an intelligence test. But the Yale students are a selected group of the population, and Whitney and Huntington appear to argue that they are selected on the basis of an equal social status of the parents, and therefore that we should conclude that within the same class the abler parents have the more children.

I would not like to deny that this may be so; indeed, I hope that it may be. But the selection of the Yale students for examination seems to equalize the education of the children, rather than the social status of the parents. Remembering that the only child may be expected to get a "better start in life" than the member of a family of six, we may perhaps expect to find at Yale the only children of less successful parents, educated at equal expense and side by side with the children of the more stringently selected parents who are able, with families of six, still to send them to Yale.

In its general features the differential birth rate in America, as is most ably shown by Huntington and Whitney in this book, displays just the same characters as it does in England. If I have put upon the results of some of their researches an interpretation different from that which they themselves favour, I only hope that this may serve to call attention to a body of data and to a method of investigation which, in my opinion, has an even greater importance than these authors at present attach to it. They have, in my opinion, hit upon a method, not merely of demonstrating the existence of the differential birth rate, but of discriminating among its possible causes.